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SUBJECT: ISLAM, AKP, HEADSCARVES, FETHULLAH GULEN, AND THE
DIYANET IN A CHANGING TURKEY

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[1](#). (SBU). SUMMARY AND INTRODUCTION. A wide range of our contacts dismissed the notion that Turkey is at risk of becoming an Islamic Republic. Their consensus is that the political system is flexible enough to accommodate pious Turks, growing political activism. Though this activism will continue to contribute to the success of the Islamic-rooted Justice and Development Party (AKP), it does not constitute an Islamic transformation of Turkish society. Pious Turks have always existed; it is their activism that is increasing. In our contacts, view, religious organizations fill the gaps where the government and official religious bodies fall short. Our religious contacts were mixed on the performance of the AKP. According to one source, about 10-15 percent of Turks belong to Tarikats, nominally illegal religious organizations that provide many social services where the government fails. Followers of the Fethullah Gulen movement are reported to be "everywhere", yet our contacts gave us conflicting comments regarding the Movement's role in politics. In their view, the Religious Affairs Directorate (Diyamet) intends to be the moral authority of the state, yet it does not seek to be an enforcement agency.

[2](#). (SBU) This report responds to reftel A. It is not intended to be an exhaustive analysis of the broad themes discussed, many of which are addressed extensively in open media and academia. Rather, it is an impressionistic account built on exchanges between poloffs and civil society during the past two months. END SUMMARY AND INTRODUCTION.

Islam and Turkey

[3](#). (SBU) Despite being officially a "secular country", many Kemalists - staunch supporters of Ataturk, perceived vision for Turkey -- fear Turkey is experiencing a social change that is the harbinger of an Islamic state. However, in our conversations with a wide range of contacts, the increasing role of religion in political life is hardly an Islamic transformation. Columnist and self-described elite secular woman Yasemin Congar dismissed the notion that Turkey is experiencing a religious awakening. Instead she saw AKP's success linked to a large section of society gaining its due political voice. She criticized heavy-handed measures to suppress religious expression -- such as banning

headscarves in universities -- since it builds resentment from those being discriminated against, increasing the risk of an Islamic backlash. She told us the United States was able to avoid a similar problem by ending official discrimination against African-Americans. Turkey should also take this path; Congar added that a prime minister who wears a headscarf would be Turkey's Obama⁸. Hulya Alper, professor at Marmara University School of Divinity, gave a bleak perspective regarding the lack of interaction between religious and secular Turks. These two communities have nearly no points of interaction⁸, therefore they do not know each other or trust each other.

¶4. (SBU) Congar told us that for many Turks, Islam is part of their identity. Islam in Turkey is Sufi-influenced, blended with Anatolian traditions. This creates a more tolerant and practical form of Islam. According to Congar, conservative Muslims are often more engaged in world affairs, international trade, and EU issues than their secular counterparts. Congar gave the example of businessmen from Kayseri) by reputation, one of Turkey's most conservative cities -- with strong business connections in Europe. Generally, she finds religious people are more liberal and open to other democratic principles than Kemalists or leftists. However, Congar concedes both religious and Kemalist have a proclivity towards anti-Semitism; it's the one thing that unites everybody⁸. (COMMENT: Many secular and religious Turks view non-Muslim citizens as outsiders. A 2006 poll found that 54 percent of respondents said being Muslim was a prerequisite for being a Turkish citizen. END COMMENT)

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¶5. (SBU) (COMMENT CONTINUED: Nevertheless, the GoT has long resisted pressure from some Muslim countries to terminate its, often close, cooperation with Israel especially in military areas. The GoT and Turkish General Staff (TGS) continue to believe Turkey's interests are served by a positive relationship with Israel as evidenced by the Joint Turkey-Israel-US exercise in the Aegean last week. END COMMENT.)

The AKP

¶6. (SBU) Despite the conventional wisdom that AKP best represents the interests of pious Turks, our religious contacts articulated a more complicated, and often critical assessment of the ruling party's performance. Zaman columnist Kerim Balci lamented the political success of AKP, claiming that the dream is over⁸ now that it achieved its goal of reaching power. Balci stated pious Muslims are moving away from their religion as they became more mainstreamed because of their economic and political success. Balci feared that the consumption patterns of pious families are becoming more like secular Turks, pointing out that his wife's closet is twice as big as a secular woman's closet⁸. While Alper praised AKP's health care policies, such as providing health insurance cards and building clinics, she criticized AKP's drive to increase academic testing of young children.

¶7. (SBU) Columnist Cengiz Candar welcomed Prime Minister Erdogan's cabinet reshuffle that brought in former Parliament Speaker Bulent Arinc) seen as a leading light in the conservative wing of the AKP -- as Deputy Prime Minister. Candar saw this as a good sign of checks and balances returning to the AKP administration. Arinc is a heavyweight to whom Erdogan defers to as a moral authority. When he was Speaker, Arinc and former Foreign Minister Gul acted as a brake on Erdogan's impulsiveness. This balance was lost after Arinc's term expired and Gul was elected president, according to Candar.

¶18. (SBU) Tarikats)- the nominally illegal religious organizations that are nonetheless a part of in Turkish society) are often blamed by Kemalists for undermining the secular state. Despite the ban on religious brotherhoods, it is generally known that they exist and flourish, yet our contacts all stated they are widely misunderstood. Former Motherland Party (ANAP) Minister Arif Denizolgun told us about 10-15 percent of Turks belong to a tarikat, with far more benefiting from their services without being formal members. According to Denizolgun, tarikats revolve around a function, such as education or social work, providing services where the state fails. These groups are not nefarious underground organizations bent on converting Turkey into an Islamic Republic. He told us this misinformation is often deliberately promoted, such as the stories of the fake Aczimendi tarikat of the late 1990s that was promoted by the State to disparage all tarikats.

¶19. (SBU) The Naksibendi brotherhood is assumed to be the largest tarikat in Turkey, followed by the Kadiris. Balci characterized the difference between Naksibendis and Kadiris as best illustrated in their views of the relationship between people (Halk) and God (Hak). For Naksibendis, the moment you join, you are close to God; it is your duty to go into the world and bring that closeness to the people. Kadiris start close to the people and worldliness and devote themselves through study and prayer -- often loud and ecstatic) to getting closer to God. These groups tend to be fragmented, dominated by a strong man, or in at least one case a daughter of a respected religious man. Leaders can be influential in people,s lives, even after death. Balci used the analogy of the &unsheathed sword8 to illustrate the unbounded power followers attribute to righteous leaders after death.

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¶10. (SBU) Columnist Cengiz Candar characterized tarikats as networks of people helping each other. He pointed to the Naksibendi Iskenderpasha tarikat, which was critical to setting up the AKP. Iskenderpasa member Korkut Ozal was at the center of AKP,s formation, brokering introductions and making connections. Candar scoffed at the Kemalist nightmare scenario of one day awakening to find an Islamic Republic of Turkey; &it just doesn,t work that way. AKP is made of many different groups; it is not just a Naksi party.8

Fethullah Gulen

¶11. (SBU) Another group that sparks the ire of the Kemalists are the followers of the religious leader Fethullah Gulen. Our contacts all agree they are &everywhere8 in Turkish society, including the strongest bastion of Kemalism -- the military. Congar told us military leadership is increasingly concerned with the Gulen Movement,s infiltration of the higher ranks of the armed forces, and are keen to continually purge Gulenists from their ranks. One tactic for ferreting them out is to hold a pool party where military officers are expected to bring their wives, thus exposing the pious women who refuse to wear a swimsuit to the detriment of their husbands, careers. Congar, however, noted Gulen supporters have begun to act in a secular manner to protect their identities. For example, while the secularists, wives attend pool parties with one-piece suits, Gulenist,s wives will wear more revealing two-piece swimsuits. She also mentioned stories of pious officers stocking their house and trash with alcohol bottles

to fool the ever vigilant inspectors seeking to root out non-secular officers. (COMMENT: Many Kemalists and academics assume the Gulen Movement has already captured the police in Turkey (reftel B & C). Significant Gulen inroads into the military would lead many Kemalists to believe their last defensive perimeter against fundamental Islam has been breached. END COMMENT).

¶12. (SBU) Balci, who introduced himself as a member of the Fethullah Gulen community, which means I am not an unbiased person, claimed Gulen disavowed politics and anyone connected to a political party. He told us of a member of the Gulen Movement who was offered a Minister slot in a potential Tansu Ciller cabinet. As a result, he was shunned by the Movement, a difficult but necessary action according to Balci. Gulen was adamant that his philosophy remain pure, uncorrupted by politics. Established religions, in contrast, will be contaminated by political pressures. Balci told us Gulen will not attempt to return to Turkey now, since that would be interpreted as a move to create an institutional religion. He might, however, return to Turkey just before his death, seeing once again the country he loves. Gulen will not appoint a leader of the movement to succeed him, since that would create such an institution that he wants to avoid. However, Balci expected that someone will succeed Gulen after his death, thereby corrupting the leader's vision for the movement.

¶13. (SBU) Candar, countered that for the first time in history, the Gulen Movement cast its lot with a political party when it backed the AKP in the 2007 national election, contributing to its decisive victory. Traditionally, the Gulen Movement had rejected such an alliance because it was not godly to have faith represented -- and thereby diminished) by a political party. The Movement used to support a range of parties across the political spectrum, but now they have given up on everyone else.

Headscarves

¶14. (SBU) Many Kemalists are troubled by the growing prevalence of headscarves around Istanbul, yet Congar believed this is a not a result of increasing piety. These women always existed, according to Congar, in the past; however, they were stuck in the house, unseen by people like me. Balci also agreed there is a movement of covered women leaving the house and moving into previous secular

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spaces, such as shopping malls, yet he sees a dark side to these pious women engaging in mainstream society. He told us that five years ago, women who wore the headscarf also diligently followed other Islamic traditions, but the headscarf is now only used as a political statement. Often these women do not follow the complete program, compromising the religious meaning of covering. Balci criticized the covered women working at his newspaper who smoke during their lunch break.

¶15. (SBU) In contrast, Alper acknowledged that each person can have different ways to practice Islam. While she noted wearing the headscarf is an important component for a woman to follow Islam, it should not be the litmus test for measuring piety since women who do not wear the headscarf can be more devout than those who do. Alper pointed out the absurdity of the headscarf ban at her campus. She told us that some of her students at the Theology School wear bulky hats over their banned headscarves. (NOTE: We also saw students wearing these hats -- ridiculous-looking accommodation that nominally permits the university to turn a blind eye to women getting around the ban. END NOTE). Working as a theology instructor, Alper is allowed to wear a headscarf, yet she must tie it behind her head while working. She told us she then ties a tighter headscarf when she leaves

the campus. She, however, still needs to remove her own headscarf when she attends to required university administrative duties outside of the Theology School,s campus.

The Diyanet

¶16. (C) According to James Gibbon, a doctoral student provided excellent access to the Diyanet (Religious Affairs Directorate) for his academic research (please protect), the Diyanet intends to be the moral authority of the state, but it seeks no muscle for enforcement. The Directorate,s focus is to be the provider of &>true information8. It publishes pamphlets and answer questions regarding doctrine through a web-based help site and a &fetvah hotline8. Generally the Diyanet sees religion as a field of knowledge.

¶17. (C) Gibbon,s graduate research looked at the Directorate,s move to decentralize writing of the Friday sermons, as a result of which he saw little impact on the content of the sermons. The move to allow local imams in each of the 81 provinces to write their own Friday prayers resulted in adding local context to the generally benign sermon. The imams generally self-censor, since their sermons need to go through multiple layers of review, ultimately needing the approval of the Diyanet. (NOTE: During Friday prayers, there are two kinds of sermons) the vaiz, which is a longer sermon that worshippers hear as they wander in before prayers, and the hutbe, which is a very brief thematic message delivered right after prayers. The hutbe is the standardized message that requires Diyanet approval. END NOTE.) Gibbon said the text of a hutbe generally fits on a single sheet of paper and only takes 3 to 4 minutes to read. Often, the hutbe are published on a website Friday morning to avoid press commentary and complaint. The Diyanet rarely sends out investigators to certify the content of the sermons. There are only four official inspectors who mainly make sure the mosques are open on time and are clean and sanitary. The check on the content comes from the parishioners themselves, ready to complain to the Diyanet if they feel the imam is spreading radical ideology.

¶18. (C) Gibbon, who personally has read years, worth of hutbes, told us these sermons have mostly &good citizenship8 messages, typically anodyne in the extreme) pertaining to preventing forest fires or obeying traffic laws. Gibbon looked into hutbes spreading anti-missionary rhetoric, but his search through 2004 did not find any such inflammatory rhetoric. He did find the Diyanet web-site spreading a story regarding well-funded missionaries who were passing out bibles with \$100 bills stashed inside to win over coverts. When pressed, a Diyanet official said these claims do not lead to violence and that missionaries were a &threat to our national values.8

¶19. (C) According the Gibbon, the Diyarbakir mufti earlier

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this year saw no need to conduct sermons in Kurdish since he claimed no one ever made this request. However, now he is reportedly leading prayers in Kurdish, evasively justifying this by stating &we do what we need to do8. Gibbons noted a turning point for the mufti could have been the massacre in Mardin, in which 44 people were murdered at a wedding (reftel D). One of the victims was a popular imam, cited by the Diyanet as a &model imam8, who reportedly learned Kurdish during his service in the region. Also, his generosity to children made the imam a respected figure in the community. Gibbons suggested this mufti,s death caused some in the Diyanet to understand the benefits of reaching out to Kurdish mosque attendees.

¶20. (C) COMMENT: Islam in Turkey is a cherished and broadly contested element of who the Turks are. Both

secular and religious Turks view Islam as an important element in their identity. Our interlocutors generally stressed Islam in Turkey has always been less susceptible to radicalism. All of the above contacts quickly dismissed the notion that Turkey is moving to become an Islamist Republic. Ironically, the mechanisms used to &protect secularism& encourage the secretiveness of influential non-governmental organizations like the Gulen Movement. The State,s attempt to influence religious organizations and teachings -- the Diyanet -- appears unable to control the more secretive groups. While these groups often provide needed social services, their lack of transparency and sometimes fanatical devotion to a single religious figure arouse the suspicions of secularists.

¶21. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: Islam is also divisive in Turkey.

The Kemalist establishment, which is being dislodged from its privileged position, casts more religious Turks as a threat to the secular republic. Yet, religious Turks are not a uniform block, and are often at odds with each other and the AKP.

WIENER